Virtue and Knowledge

DAVID CARR

Abstract
In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle distinguishes fairly sharply between the practical deliberation of moral virtue and the epistemic reflection of theoretical or truth-focused enquiry. However, drawing on insights from Plato and Iris Murdoch, the present paper seeks a more robust epistemic foundation for virtuous deliberation as primarily grounded in clear or correct perception of the world and human association, character and conduct. While such perception may not be sufficient for moral virtue, it is here argued that it is necessary. Murdoch's view that literature may afford especially effective correction of moral misperception is also supported by appeal to literary examples.

Knowledge and virtue

This paper sets out to defend an old philosophical claim that acquiring a moral virtue necessarily involves coming to have *knowledge*. To be sure, the term 'knowledge' is prone to diverse and loose ordinary usage. In addition to the evidence-based knowledge of information or theoretical speculation we also speak of knowledge of practical capacities and skills, such as playing tennis or violin, and even of non-human brutes knowing how to weave webs, build dams or make honeycombs. In the present view, this last application of the term 'knowledge' to non-human activities is merely analogical or courtesy and of little real epistemic significance. That said, the knowing how sense is surely of more epistemic substance. For while we may speak only figuratively of spiders knowing how to spin webs, there seems to be real enough sense in which what a human agent has learned in acquiring the skill or capacity of violin or tennis playing involves the rational grasp of (albeit practical) principles and procedures that are more akin to the theoretical cognition of 'knowing that' than to the innate non-rational information processing of non-human brutes.[1]

[1] For some argument in this vein by the present writer, see David Carr, 'The Logic of Knowing How and Ability', *Mind* **88** (1979), 394–409; 'Knowledge in Practice', *American Philosophical Quarterly* **18** (1981), 53–61; 'Theory and Practice: Some Analogous Concepts and their Disanalogies', *Metaphilosophy* **1–2** (1982), 228–239.

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Still, the claim of this paper – arguably at odds with some contemporary neo-Aristotelian perspectives on the cultivation of moral virtue – is that the knowledge of morally virtuous agents is something closer to if not an actual species of the apprehension of truths about the world of the sort commonly associated with the cognition of knowing that. Further to this, though not to be pursued here, I think that the acquisition of such knowledge has a particular significance for us by virtue of its personally formative influence on our lives. Precisely, the knowledge that we acquire in becoming more courageous, temperate, honest, just or compassionate is of human value insofar as agents are significantly transformed by their possession of it. To be sure, I believe that this may be said of any significant knowledge: but I think it is especially so of virtuous knowledge in the present sense.

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle

The view to which I am inclined seems close to, if not actually identical with, that of Plato's Socrates in a number of key Platonic dialogues:[2] indeed, Socrates is perhaps most immediately associated with the view that virtue is knowledge. Moreover, the knowledge that Socrates here takes virtuous agents to possess is no mere pre-rational intuition or practical ability: or, at least, to the extent that it may have practical outcomes, these are grounded in something like a rational grasp of truths about oneself and/or the world. In this light, it is not just that the wicked fail to do certain sorts of morally correct or commendable things, but that they have also failed to appreciate something about themselves and/or the world. They are actually in the grip of (cognitive) error. From this viewpoint, right action need be neither sufficient nor necessary for virtue, since an agent might (say, by accident) do the right thing in the absence of virtuous knowledge, or do what is wrong (through practical error) despite such knowledge. Be that as it may, what agents primarily need in order to be virtuous is to have right or accurate perceptions of themselves and the world and to be free of mistakes about or misunderstandings of such matters.

Insofar, Socrates' conception of virtuous knowledge seems to have been an epistemically strong one and Plato's search in later dialogues

[2] See especially: Plato, *Gorgias* and *Republic*, in E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds), *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961).

for an account of the nature of knowledge was no less evidently concerned to provide secure rational foundations for such reliable moral discernment. That account of knowledge as *justified true belief* – albeit rejected by Plato himself as not entirely satisfactory – has also been influential to the present day, though empirically minded modern philosophers would strongly disavow Plato's own austere rationalistic constraints on such knowledge. Still, scepticism about the idea of moral knowledge was evidently rife in Plato's own day – as the hostile responses of dialogue disputants to Socrates' radical arguments readily attests – and has continued unabated up to the present day. Without undue rehearsal of moral theoretical developments since Plato's time, modern ethics has been most evidently divided between reductive forms of moral subjectivism and relativism for which moral responses are matters of (relatively non-reflective) personal sentiment or social conditioning, and those more objectivist theories for which moral engagement is the rational observance of perhaps not especially compelling general rules of duty or utility.

Indeed, it was in reaction to these equally problematic ethical extremes that modern neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics was born in the mid-twentieth century.[3] Undoubtedly, the general appeal of Aristotle's ethics rests on its emphasis on the *practical* character of moral life. Insofar, while it may be conceded that moral virtues involve feelings or sentiments, such affect needs to be subordinate to the practical demands of public morality; and while it would also seem that moral virtue requires reason, the deliberation in question is generally held to be *practical* rather than theoretical. In this spirit, Elizabeth Anscombe called practical reason 'one of Aristotle's best discoveries'.[4] But the practical side of moral virtue is also reinforced in Aristotle's ethics by the frequently highlighted Aristotelian comparison of cultivating virtue to the development or acquisition of physical skills: we learn to be virtuous agents by the practice of such virtues as courage, temperance and justice as we become good craftsmen or musicians by practising craft or musical skills.[5]

[3] Such birth is commonly traced to G. E. M. Anscombe, 1958 paper 'Modern Moral Philosophy', reprinted in G.E.M. Anscombe, *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe: Volume III Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).

[4] G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Basil Blackewell, 1959), 58.

[5] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in R. McKeon (ed.) *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), book 2, part 1.

But while this analogy has been much pressed in recent neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics,[6] it is clearly not unproblematic and Aristotle himself shows considerable unease or ambivalence about it. The first fairly obvious difference between moral virtues and skills is that the practical deliberation of *phronesis* is explicitly distinguished from the 'making by the aid of a right rule'[7] by which Aristotle characterises the productive deliberations of *techne*. Thus, to whatever extent *phronesis* and *techne* are both forms of practical reason, they seem to be focused on rather different objects to no less disparate ends. While *techne* is concerned with the production of useful or ornamental artifacts, *phronesis* is apparently more about the ordering for purposes of human personal and social wellbeing of aspects of our psycho-physical economy: as I have previously expressed this point, 'virtues are more or less equivalent to states of emotion, feeling or appetite ordered in accordance with some deliberative ideal of practical wisdom'.[8] Moreover, such ordering also seems required precisely because – as Socrates and Plato keenly appreciated – our emotions, feelings and appetites are prone to disorder in ways that lead to our seeing or *perceiving* things awry. In this light, the moral wisdom of virtue would appear to be a matter of coming to see *rightly* in some fairly robust epistemic sense. But there is also the key point in book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*[9] that we possess virtues in a rather different way from the expertise of skills: thus, whereas I can always choose whether or not to exercise some acquired skill – such as playing the piano – to have some measure of a virtue such as courage or justice commits us to the corresponding exercise of it.

All the same, the striking distinction drawn by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* – that upon which much latter day virtue ethics has turned – is that between practical and theoretical reason. On the face of it, Aristotle takes practical wisdom to have a different goal or end from the truth seeking of theoretical reason and to repudiate Plato's search for epistemic grounds for moral virtue in any strong Socratic sense. The overall drift here – endorsed by much modern virtue ethics – is that the practical deliberation of *phronesis* is a matter of discerning reasons for action that are specific to particular and local contexts of practice and not susceptible of codification in

[6] For a notable example, see Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[7] Op. cit., note 5, book 6, section 4.

[8] David Carr, 'Virtue, Mixed Emotion and Moral Ambivalence, *Philosophy* **84** (2009), 31–46.

[9] Op. cit., note 5, book 6, section 5.

general rules of the kind for which Socrates and Plato seem to have sought. Practical wisdom is therefore not a matter of perceiving *truths* in the manner of theoretical knowledge or reason, but of seeking the best available practical outcomes according to some, albeit naturalistically framed, ideal of human flourishing.

That said, while Aristotle's line between practical wisdom and theoretical knowledge seems sharply drawn, there are places in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that do apparently incline towards something closer to the epistemically stronger moral knowledge of Socrates – one of which is in his not entirely satisfactory exploration of the problem of incontinence in the seventh book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.[10] Exercised by the question of how less than virtuous agents – such as the incontinent and continent – fall into moral error, Aristotle suggests that this is because their moral vision is clouded by false desires or appetites: the less than virtuous may at some level know what is appropriate or good to do, but they are like the drunken whose perceptions are blurred or distorted by inebriation. To be sure, this closely sails to the Socratic reading of incontinence as a kind of ignorance to the point of precisely resurrecting a familiar issue about our moral responsibility for such epistemic failure. On this view, if agents are to be held responsible for their moral errors, it seems that they would need to have known what they were doing: but if they were ignorant they could not have known and could not therefore be held to account. Still, irrespective of this issue, Aristotle does here clearly couch the issue of misconduct in more direct epistemic terms of moral *misperception* of how things are or should be.

At this point, John McDowell's significant latter day attempt to move virtue ethics in a more moral realist direction, precisely via some attention to Aristotle's discussion of incontinence in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, should certainly be acknowledged.[11] In the present view, however, McDowell's apparently epistemically insulated or agent-privileged account of the virtuous perspective or viewpoint seems difficult to reconcile with any idea of the publicity of knowledge: precisely, if – in the spirit of Wittgenstein – knowledge is taken to be something readily communicable between agents, it is not easy to see how McDowell's highly personalized virtuous vision might be shared with or transmitted to the non-virtuous. In the light of this concern, we shall now turn to the rather less

[10] Op. cit., note 5, book 7, section 3.

[11] John McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason, in R. Crisp and M. Slote (eds), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Aristotelian and more Platonic modern moral realism of Iris Murdoch.

Moral perception in Iris Murdoch

Murdoch is undoubtedly one of the great mavericks of modern moral philosophy. While her key influences are fairly easily discerned, she is often cited by contemporary philosophers and her work has been celebrated in the writings of some of the leading lights of modern philosophy,[12] she is also rather outside the modern ethical mainstream and there do not seem to have been any very significant analytical attempts to develop her ideas. However, it is much to the present purpose that Murdoch's work does promise a useful route – to which we shall shortly return – to the learning and teaching of virtuous knowledge. On the other hand, while her main ethical works – *The Sovereignty of the Good*[13] and *Guide to the Metaphysics of Morals*[14] – are full of extraordinary flashes of insight, they are also often rambling and digressive and do not often point to any very clear ethical destination. Still, the spirit of Plato clearly haunts her work and this is nowhere more apparent than in the two places – both in *Sovereignty of the Good* – to which readers of her work are usually referred. The first of these is her oft cited remark that: 'In the moral life, the enemy is the fat relentless ego'.[15] The second is the no less often quoted parable[16] of M, the mother whose initial dislike of her daughter-in-law D – who she regards as shallow and vulgar – turns out to be based on prejudiced failure to appreciate what are actually qualities of freshness, charm and spontaneity. Again, the focus here is clearly on failure of moral perception with significant epistemic implications: the import of Murdoch's story seems to be that the morally transformed M now *knows* something that she did not previously. However, before turning to a closer examination of this story, it may be worth looking at the way in which the

[12] See, for example, essays by Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum and others in M. Antonaccio and W. Schweiker, (eds) *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[13] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

[14] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Vintage Classics, 2003).

[15] Op. cit., note 13, page 52.

[16] Op. cit., note 13, chapter 1.

general drift of Murdoch's thought here echoes Plato. In *The Laws*, Plato writes:

> 'But of all faults of the soul the gravest is one which is inborn in most men, one which all excuse in themselves and none therefore attempts to avoid – that conveyed in the maxim that 'everyone is naturally his own friend' and that it is only right and proper that he should be so, whereas, in truth, this same violent attachment to self is the constant source of all manner of misdeeds in every one of us. The eye of love is blind where the beloved is concerned and so a man proves a bad judge of right, good, honour, in the conceit that more regard is due to his personality than to the real fact, whereas a man who means to be great must care neither for self nor for its belongings, but for justice, whether exhibited in his own conduct or rather in that of another. From this same fault springs also that universal conviction that one's own folly is wisdom, with its consequences that we fancy we know everything when we know as good as nothing, refuse to allow others to manage businesses we do not understand, and fall into inevitable errors in transacting it for ourselves. Every man then must eschew self-love and follow ever in the steps of his better, undeterred by any shame for his ease.'[17]

The main emphasis of this passage on moral failure as a kind of *epistemic* failure – a misperception of reality or fact as a consequence of over-attachment to our own egocentric or selfish concerns – is plain enough. Moreover, whilst it might at first sight seem that Plato's fairly late view here does not advance much beyond that of Socrates – and is therefore prone to the same difficulties about responsibility for our actions – it is arguable that it does precisely this. For while the Socratic view is liable to the problem that if moral misconduct follows from ignorance we cannot be responsible for it, the view of the *Laws* seems to be that moral failure is not merely due to ignorance, but to a *self-imposed* ignorance that – insofar as it is self-imposed – does render us morally accountable. Indeed, true to the spirit of this later Plato, Murdoch's parable clearly suggests that M's morally prejudiced and condescending misperception does not at all excuse her from moral responsibility, precisely insofar as it *is* prejudiced and condescending – rather than merely uninformed: if M fails to comprehend the freshness, charm

[17] Plato, *The Laws*, in E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds.), *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961), book 5, 731d – 732a, page 1318.

and spontaneity of D due to her own prejudices, she precisely *ought* to see her in the correct light and is to blame if she does not make such effort. And, of course, this is true of so many areas of our moral life in which ignorance – such as of the law of the land – is no excuse for misconduct.

At all events, if M has *rightly* come to see that D is charming and spontaneous and that her former perception of her as shallow and vulgar was mistaken, I think that we should say – evidently with Murdoch – that she has acquired a kind of *moral knowledge*: that is, some acquaintance with a moral reality that is less in error that it was. By much the same token, however, we might also say that if M has merely deceived or sought to persuade herself that D – who, as it happens, *really* is shallow and vulgar – is actually charming and spontaneous, perhaps in order to try to be more accommodating or compassionate towards her, she has *not* thereby acquired moral knowledge. In that case, we might also say that she is in greater moral error than before and that her more accommodating conduct towards D – to which we shall shortly return – is more sentimental indulgence than genuine compassion. But, then, what should we say in the case where M *correctly* perceives D as shallow and vulgar and proceeds to be more deeply confirmed in that opinion with further acquaintance? Has she also thereby gained virtuous knowledge in the light of such correct moral perception?

It may be safer to say here that while M has certainly acquired *knowledge*, she has not obviously or necessarily acquired *virtuous* knowledge in the absence of any clear appreciation of the moral implications of such intelligence for her attitudes and conduct or life in general. To be sure, there may also be rather different possibilities in this regard – such as trying to be tolerant and forbearing of D's shallowness and vulgarity, seeking ways to help her be less shallow and vulgar, or treating her with condescension and contempt – not all of which, of course, might be considered morally virtuous. But the same, of course, applies to the case where M rightly comes to see that she was mistaken to regard D – who is actually charming and spontaneous – as shallow and vulgar. This *might* help M be better disposed towards D; but – if, say, she is also driven by deep psychological resentment or jealousy of D – it might yet do nothing to undermine M's negative attitude. The key point is that while some correction of her perceptions and attitudes to D would seem *necessary* for any response of M to D to be morally virtuous – since we could hardly regard a response as such if it was informed by false perceptions – it still seems less than *sufficient*. The trouble now is that this might well seem to raise the hoary old philosophical

spectres of fact-value and is-ought: precisely, how to we get from the perception that things are thus and so to the position of regarding such perceptions as morally significant or impacting virtue?

As I have argued on previous occasions,[18] I believe that despite common confusion between them, these are rather different philosophical bugbears and the first is anyway more relevant to present concerns than the second. For the present concern is not with the moral *motivational* issue of how our perceptions of how things are might incline us to act, but rather with the question of the *epistemic* significance that we might take such perceptions to have for clearer moral *understanding* of our own responses or of our relations with others. It is this move from apparent perception of mere facts of the case to appreciation of their moral import that might appear to be threatened by the thought that even if correcting her formerly mistaken perceptions of D is necessary for M to have the moral knowledge of virtue, it is not obviously *sufficient*. The issue might be precisely viewed as that of how we get from apparently morally neutral perceptions to knowledge of what is of moral value or worth valuing.

Still, it is at this point that – despite his apparent disassociation of the deliberation of practical wisdom from theoretical and epistemic reason in the *Nicomachean Ethics* – the theoretical grounding of moral virtues, albeit loosely, in the requirements of *eudaimonia* or flourishing by Aristotle and his latter day naturalist heirs is undoubtedly helpful. As Peter Geach, for one, vividly put it, 'men need the virtues, as bees need stings'.[19] In this light, while it is not entirely possible to disentangle concepts of human character and virtue from considerations of personal or local human interest and value, they may nevertheless have a descriptive component or basis in the facts of human life and association. From this viewpoint, one may reasonably reject any implausible non-cognitivist or sentimentalist story that such evaluations as 'shallow', 'vulgar', 'fresh', 'charming' and 'spontaneous' in the story of M belong to a realm of entirely subjective perspective: most of us understand well enough for purposes

[18] David Carr, The Primacy of Virtues in Ethical Theory': Part 1, *Cogito* **9** (1995), 238–244; 'After Kohlberg: Some Implications of an Ethics of Virtue for the Theory and Practice of Moral Education', *Studies in Philosophy and Education* **15** (1996), 353–370; see also Kristjan Kristjansson, *Virtues and Vices in Positive Psychology: A Philosophical Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[19] P. T. Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977), 17.

of clear interpersonal communication which human characteristics are signified by such terms and will also doubtless know people who fit such descriptions. The problem seems rather – as Murdoch's variety of moral realism clearly recognizes – that given the highly affectively charged personal and interpersonal contexts in which such terms have their natural abode, we cannot ever be sure whether we are using them in ways that are not biased or self-serving. In short the problem is not that of whether we *can* see rightly – or, at least, better than we do at present – but rather that of *how* we might come to see rightly or in a way that is not clouded by the 'fat relentless ego'. For a better purchase on this question, we may pause to consider some stories.

Moral knowledge through narrative and story

The Arthurian stories of medieval legend are variously concerned with the pursuit of moral virtue – in particular the virtues of Christian perfection of the grail quest: as such, they are also sources of insight into the issue of the acquisition of moral knowledge in the sense of this paper. In this regard, one puzzle of these stories is that Lancelot who more than any other stands out as the great hero of Arthurian legend – a knight who seems to possess in abundance all the leading chivalric virtues of honour, valour and service and who is always first to defend the underdog – conspicuously fails, unlike Percival, Bors and Galahad, to achieve the vision of the grail that is the ultimate measure of such knightly virtue. One reason that might be cited for this – his adulterous passion for Guinevere – is not especially compelling: such love is not – at least in all versions of the story – clearly consummated, and Lancelot's conduct towards the queen is invariably honourable.[20]

Still, an interesting episode in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* may come nearer to the heart of the matter.[21] On returning from his failed grail quest, Lancelot encounters combat between knights in white and black apparel in which the latter are being worsted by the former. Prompted by his usual support of the underdog, Lancelot pitches in in support of the black knights and is duly routed along with

[20] See David Carr, 'Spiritual, Moral and Heroic Virtue: Aristotelian Character in the Arthurian and Grail Narratives', *Journal of Beliefs and Values: Studies in Religion & Education* **24** (2003), 15–26.

[21] Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (London: Omega Books, 1986), book xv, chapters v and vi.

them. In consequence, Lancelot falls into deep dejection, convinced that this marks his final dishonour. However, he then meets a holy woman who explains the meaning of this episode to him. Whereas the black knights symbolise the pride and vainglory of worldly reputation, the white knights stand for the spiritual and world-transcendent values of true moral wisdom and virtue. Lancelot's problem – as the ultimate overachiever – is that his ideas of knightly virtue, honour and valour are defined exclusively in terms of success and reputation, so that he cannot cope with the humiliation of defeat. On the other hand, the grail is the symbol of ultimate Christian moral and spiritual triumph over the very worst suffering, humiliation and indignity of death on the cross. All the same, by virtue of his own small taste of such humiliation and defeat, Lancelot seems to learn – comes to appreciate or *know* – something about honour and courage that he did not before.

A somewhat similar story of the uncomprehending over-achiever is that of Geraint and Enid – also in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, but explored in rather richer psychological detail in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*.[22] Once again, Geraint is a leading champion of Arthur's court whose knightly reputation increases unabated until he falls in love and marries the lady Enid – thereupon retreating to their love nest and neglecting his knightly duties. This distresses Enid who considers herself to be cause of the declining public respect in which Geraint has come to be held. She expresses this by saying aloud to herself one night that she has dishonoured Geraint and is no more worthy of him – an utterance overheard by Geraint who takes her to be confessing adultery. By way of punishing Enid and also defending his lapsed knightly reputation, Geraint takes her on a perilous expedition, involving much dangerous combat with various villainous opponents that also tests Enid's loyalty to the limit. However, Geraint's adventure on this occasion is more clearly a journey of *self-discovery* in which he comes to recognise not just Enid's deep and unswerving love, but also his own failure – in the grip of romantic passion – to have understood not just that love but the very conception of honour as reputation on which he has taken this to be based. As in the case of Lancelot, Geraint's ideas of honour, valour and love are immature and shallow and therefore insufficient to withstand the slightest assaults of insecurity, jealousy and distrust. On the face of it, Geraint's conceptions of honour and love – like Lancelot's – needed tempering in the fires of experience and to be cleansed of

[22] Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1989).

the errors and delusions of distorted sentiment for a better understanding of such qualities.

The most general answer suggested by these stories to the question of what assists Lancelot and Geraint to some measure of moral knowledge is *experience*: less in the sense of direct or immediate perception, more of something like a continuous personal history. Moreover, the elements of such experience that are most obviously relevant to the acquisition of moral knowledge are their *painful* or distressing features. Unfortunately, like other human agents, Lancelot and Geraint learn morally as well as in other respects from their *errors* and *mistakes*, and the price of moral knowledge in the strong epistemic sense of this paper is therefore all too often the bitter wisdom of hindsight acquired in the wake of much personal and interpersonal disaster and mayhem. Indeed, on some latter day views, moral and other learning is largely a matter of avoiding the painful experiences and negative affect consequent upon this or that untoward behaviour: thus, on crude empiricist or behaviourist accounts, moral or other learning would come down basically to avoidance of negative stimuli in the spirit of once bitten twice shy. Indeed, while neither an empiricist nor a behaviourist, the founding father of progressive education Jean-Jacques Rousseau effectively argued in *Emile*[23] – anticipating later 'progressive' psychoanalytic interpretations of this point – that insofar as moral lessons to the young are mostly premature and ineffective, the best teachers of right conduct are nature and experience: give children the freedom to make mistakes and let them learn from the negative consequences.

Even making the usual allowances for Rousseauian hyperbole, of course, this is hardly advisable educational policy in any number of contexts in which the young need to learn morally. Regarding recent examples, however, the obvious problem with such simple accounts of moral or other learning is that they fail to do justice to the psychological complexity of the moral learning of such human agents as Lancelot and Geraint. Clearly, arriving at a better understanding of such moral values as honour, valour and love is not just a matter of coming to avoid situations that cause painful sensations – as a non-human brute might come to avoid the wasp by which it was previously stung – but of re-education in concepts of some moral and cultural complexity and sophistication. To be sure, Lancelot was personally discomforted and undermined by his defeat by the white knights, but the remedy is not to avoid future occasions of such

[23] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, translated by B. Foxley (London: Dent, 1974).

defeat, but to come to understand its meaning and how to accommodate morally to setbacks of this sort. By himself, he was unable to escape the despondency occasioned by his defeat and it took the anchoress to talk him out of this. Thus, while it is arguable that Lancelot and Geraint could not have gained the moral knowledge they did without their adverse experiences – though this is a point, as we shall see, requiring some qualification – they also needed help to grasp the significance of these in a way that such experiences could not alone and unaided provide.

Arguably, Socrates and/or Plato appreciated the importance of appropriate logical ordering of defining concepts for a coherent moral perspective on our experience well enough: this is precisely what the Platonic character of Socrates attempts in his explorations of justice, courage, piety and so on in the *Republic* and elsewhere. Indeed, it would seem that the *reductio* of Socratic *elenchus* aspires precisely to something like the epistemic testing of intuitions concerning (for example) justice against common experience: Socrates' sparring partners are invited to propose a definition of justice such as p (telling the truth and paying one's debts) that is then shown by him to be consistent with a troublesome counter-example q (returning borrowed weapons to a murderous madman), which in turn proves the inadequacy of p. This is not too far away from Lancelot's conversion by the anchoress from the view that honour and courage are measured by worldly success and reputation: for since – on a morally more advanced view of the matter – one may well have the former without the latter or the latter without the former, worldly success and reputation are nether necessary nor sufficient for such virtues.

Clearly, Aristotle was less happy with this Socratic perspective on the acquisition of moral knowledge and understanding. The first main sticking point seems to be precisely that the philosophical methods of Socrates and Plato seem too abstract, *a priori* or armchair and do not give sufficient place to the role of *practical experience* in the acquisition of virtue or the deliberations required for virtuous conduct. The point of moral deliberation, Aristotle insists, is not to define 'goodness' but to become good: in this regard, it seems that a 'mere' grasp of what goodness means may be morally impotent and that one might indeed have this without actually possessing virtue. If it is also true that – as supported by the present paper – moral virtue centrally concerns the ordering of appetites, feelings and emotions – then the deliberations of virtue should be directed to that and not to discovering any truths about ourselves or the world of the sort for which knowledge seeks. This also reinforces

the strong Aristotelian emphasis on early training in right affect and conduct as a prerequisite of moral virtue. In addition, he appears to hold that the highly context sensitive practical deliberations of virtue are such as to preclude codification in the form of general rules of the sort for which the knowledge of empirical science seeks. In view of all of this, one might well wonder whether it is at all worth regarding the practical wisdom of virtue as any sort of *knowledge* as such. It seems to be thoughts such as these that underpin the sharp *Nicomachean* distinction between the practical deliberation of moral virtue and the knowledge of scientific or empirical enquiry.

Still, regardless of these points concerning the executive role of practical wisdom in the cultivation and proper conduct of virtue, it seems reasonable to claim that those who have developed appropriately virtuous perceptions have nevertheless acquired moral *knowledge* in the stronger epistemic sense sought by Socrates. Moreover, while it remains true that such knowledge is not quite sufficient for virtue – since someone might well acquire a more accurate perception of concepts of justice or courage without this showing in their conduct – it would seem to be *necessary*. If the conduct of Lancelot and Geraint may be rightly said to improve morally in the light of better comprehension of honour, valour and love, it would have to be informed by such knowledge. By the same token, however, if M's more sympathetic or compassionate conduct towards D is to count as virtuous, it would also need to be grounded in a clear comprehension of D as she is rather than as M might wish her to be. While any apparent sympathetic or compassionate behaviour might well impress from the outside, if it rests on failure or reluctance to see what D is *really* like, it could hardly count as genuine virtue.

However, in very general terms, it might appear that – between them – Socrates-Plato and Aristotle succeed well in identifying two key ingredients of moral or virtuous knowledge: namely, the need for accurate perception of morally salient experience on the one hand and for coherent and intelligible normative interpretation or comprehension of such facts on the other. Indeed, it would seem that the moral knowledge for which we have sought in this paper conforms well enough to the famous formula for theoretical knowledge provided by Kant: namely, that 'thoughts without content are empty and intuitions with concepts are blind'.[24] From this viewpoint, it may have been Aristotle's suspicion that the Socratic-Platonic account of virtue sailed rather too close to thoughts

[24] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (London, Macmillan, 1968), 94.

without content; but one might also fear that Aristotle's distancing of practical from theoretical enquiry runs the risk of (practically experiential) intuitions without (morally explanatory) concepts. Of course, one should also observe key differences in the relationship of concepts to experience between moral and scientific enquiry: that, for example, whereas scientific enquiry proceeds via empirical induction to the formulation of general causal laws, moral enquiry – as Socrates more or less saw – is a matter more of what might be called 'semantic abduction' or finer discrimination of the complexities of a given moral concept in the light of experiential examples and counterexamples. Indeed, such difference between moral and scientific knowledge, might well counsel caution regarding the apparent ambitions of some latter day applied virtue ethicists to forge an empirical science of measurable virtues. It is no part of the present case for moral knowledge as a key ingredient of virtue that such knowledge is attainable via the methods of empirical or statistical research and enquiry.

Moral knowledge without experience

Indeed, further to this, despite Aristotle's emphasis on the necessity of actual experience for the knowledge of virtue – not least his pessimism about the ability of the young to develop morally without it – it would not seem true to say that *no* progress in moral or virtuous understanding is possible without it. On the contrary, while Lancelot and Geraint had to learn by bitter experience what honour, courage and love really are, it may well be possible for someone who reads and reflects appropriately on their stories to learn something of the same lessons quite without such experience. Indeed, it is clear enough that far from being unique in affording insight into such moral knowledge, the stories of Arthurian legend are just the tip of an enormous cultural iceberg of creative and imaginative literature precisely concerned to learn such moral lessons at, as it were, 'second-hand'. In more modern literature, for example, the works of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy – such as *Emma, Great Expectations* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* – might spring readily to mind. It is in this respect, moreover, that Iris Murdoch seems to have departed somewhat from Plato insofar as she clearly held – and energetically pursued in her other distinguished career as an notable modern novelist – that literature may be an important, if not actually the best possible, source of insight into the delusion and error that bedevils moral perception of self and others.

In this regard, unlike Plato – whose dismissal of imaginative fiction as frivolous and even potentially corruptive distraction may sit more readily with a latter day empiricist epistemic mindset – Murdoch seems at this point rather closer to Aristotle who in his *Poetics*[25] clearly regarded the works of such great bards of his day as Sophocles and Euripides as prime sources of moral illumination, not least with regard to the refinement or purification of the moral affect of virtue. If this is so, while experience clearly plays a large role in the development of our moral understanding of self and others, perhaps we may not always have to learn the hard way. Insofar, more use than seems to have been common of late in contemporary educational contexts might well be made of such literature to assist right moral vision on the part of young and old alike.[26]

DAVID CARR (d.carr@bham.ac.uk) *is Professor Emeritus at the University of Edinburgh and Professor of Ethics and Education in the University of Birmingham Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. Recent papers include 'Is gratitude a moral virtue?'* (Philosophical Studies *2014) and 'From gratitude to lamentation*' (Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour *2015*).

[25] Aristotle, *Poetics*. in R. McKeon (Ed.) *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, New York: Random House, 1941).

[26] An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference on 'Virtue and Cognition' at the University of Gdansk, Poland in October 2015. I am grateful to the conference organiser Natasza Szutta and to conference participants – especially fellow keynotes Robert Audi, Dan Russell and Gopal Sreenivasan – for helpful comments on that occasion.